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ABSTRACT

The nature and effects of current common understandings of the relationship between work and literacy were examined along with the typical design and objectives of workplace literacy programs for members of Australia's work force. Special attention was paid to the following topics: changing demands of work and literacy at work; discourses of literacy at work as skill; new ways of work and new worker identities; effects of new discourses of and at work; current understandings of workplace literacy training; potential futures for workplace literacy training; workplaces as "communities of practice"; opportunities for authentic workplace literacy provision; and mechanisms to access workplaces to promote literacy. It was concluded that, in addition to recognizing the opportunities existing legislation provides for the marketing and development of appropriate workplace literacy training, those involved in the field of workplace literacy must acknowledge the shelf life of legislation and the need for active promotion of continuing legislation that works for the benefit of all workplace participants. It was further concluded that the fluid political situation within which workplace literacy training occurs and its contingency on factors extending beyond traditional and emerging educational contexts and concerns must also be acknowledged. (Contains 41 references.) (MN)

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UNDERSTANDING WORK AND LITERACY:

(E)MERGING DISCOURSES AT WORK

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Australia

ADULT LITERACY RESEARCH NETWORK

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UNDERSTANDING WORK AND LITERACY:
(E)MERGING DISCOURSES AT WORK

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Introduction

Workplace literacy, the term typically used to describe the role and nature of literacy at work, is a new and highly contested site of activity. The field has evolved so quickly in response to social, economic and political imperatives, that the term 'workplace literacy' has achieved a level of commonsense acceptability so that its various meanings have largely gone unchallenged. Many of these commonsense views, now grounded in discourses around workplace literacy, are in need of exploration and explication, for, not only do discourses become institutionalised and understood as natural or commonsense ways of knowing, understanding and talking about the world, thereby *reflecting* social reality, they are also involved in *producing* these social realities (Weedon, 1987).

Arguing that, as a new and fast-growing field, workplace literacy, is under-researched and consequently under-theorised, this paper begins by examining the nature and effects of current common understandings or formulations of the relationship between work and literacy, particularly as these relate to workers in the Australian workforce. This is an appropriate starting point as the new globalized economy and international competitiveness has placed the skills of current and future Australian workers under scrutiny, with concerns about workers' skills expressed in numerous official government reports as well as in the popular media. The paper then moves to evaluate what workplace literacy programs have typically been designed to do, before discussing possible ways for future workplace literacy programs to be conducted that allow real opportunities for all workplace participants to be actively involved in the process of workplace reform.

Changing demands of work and literacy at work

Along with all other industrialized nations, Australia has been involved in a process of substantial change aimed at making Australian industry more globally competitive. Related to this process has been reform within the vocational education and training sector designed to improve the quality and flexibility of existing systems, so that Australia will have a better skilled and adaptable workforce. Workplace language and literacy issues have been strongly implicated in a number of government reports, released over the last ten years, that make up what has become known as the national training reform agenda. Within this agenda, adult literacy, traditionally an area marginalized within a broader adult education context, has been repositioned and redefined as an integral element of a "labour market strategy oriented towards the achievement of a multi-skilled workforce" (Wickert, in press: 370).

Various reports that are integral to the Australian reform agenda, including those that address the relationship between literacy and work, also fit in the category of what Darrah (1992) has called 'future workplace skills literature'. Within this literature, that conveys what Gee and colleagues (1996) have called the 'Quality discourse', literacy is presented as a functional, employment-related skill. According to McCulloch (1997:72), these texts have succeeded in achieving a "profound and fundamental shift in where, how and in whose interests, literacy education is controlled and managed". McCulloch continues to note that one of the consequences of this shift is that "[d]iscussion of literacy competence is increasingly monopolised, not by educationalists, but by government and those who represent industry [so that l]iteracy educators have their roles reframed into that of implementer or as a resource for industry" (McCulloch, 1997:72). Though all may not agree that educators may be losing out to more powerful groups in contests around literacy and appropriate forms of literacy education, this viewpoint serves to highlight Street's (1995:125) contention that debates around literacy and literacy education must be increasingly understood in terms of discourses of nationalism for "it is around the concept of nation and national identity

that social issues currently diverted into the literacy debate essentially focus".

Street's point, becomes particularly powerful when applied to the field of workplace literacy. This domain of activity has been generated out of certain knowledge and commonsense understandings, socially constructed from a range of prevailing discourses on work and on literacy. Out of this fuse of ideas a particular version of 'workplace literacy' has received a preferred reading and hearing (Castleton, 1997).

Discourses of work as skill

Within the dominant discourse on the role of literacy at work, heavy emphasis is given to notions of skill within individuals. In questioning the concept of skill requirements as a valid way of interpreting and defining work, Darrah (1992) has noted how the literature typically presents the workplace context as an unproblematic "external backdrop to action that constrains, but is not affected by, worker actions" (Darrah, 1992:269). Consequentially, various processes that are internal to the factory floor, and are always involved in generating and reproducing the context in which work takes place, are not acknowledged.

Darrah has made three points about the tenets that underpin the general concept of skill requirement that are pertinent to discussions on the literacy requirements of work. Firstly, he has disputed the way work is defined, or decomposed, in terms of bundles of discrete characteristics or skills that are determined to be mutually exclusive, but collectively provide a comprehensive description of the job (Darrah, 1997:251-252). Darrah (1997) has argued this focus directs attention away from how people, individually and collectively, actually perform their jobs, onto whether they individually possess a particular array of skills. His second concern rests with the notion that there is some direct, logical way in which the identified skills are applied in order to get the job done. Darrah (1997:252) has contended that the rationality of this thinking, which suggests that if "the skills are absent, the work would not get done", can be contested on the basis of an examination of a range of workers performing the same task. He has claimed that such scrutiny would highlight the unlikelihood of workers performing the same tasks having command of exactly the same repertoire of skills, or of using them in a precise, identical sequence. Within this model, skills are again cast as inherently individualistic, denying the reality of communities of workers possessing a diverse range of skills that can be used in a complementary manner. Finally, Darrah (1997:252) has highlighted how traditional ways of conceptualising skill requirements deny the role that the workplace as a context for skilled performance, plays in how work skills are developed and defined. Furthermore, Darrah (1997: 267) has offered caution about the apparent, simplistic exercise of listing skill

requirements for work, noting that "identifying skill requirements is an act of power with enormous organizational consequences". The whole edifice of skill requirements "situates blame or responsibility in people and their (lack of) skills, instead of in organizational context" (Darrah, 1997: 267). Darrah's concerns are also supported by Australian workplace studies of people such as Maietta (1992), O'Connor (1993, 1994) and Marginson (1994) who likewise argue for representations of skill as "always specific to the context of the work and to the knowledge system, to the 'conception of the subject matter', and to the character and intentions of the agents themselves" (Marginson, 1994:245). Such formulations also underlie the importance of recognising discourses as more than just instances of language use. Rather, we need to work with broader understandings of discourses as "systems of meaning embedded in certain institutions, that, in turn are determined by ideologies 'in response to larger social structures'"(Kress, 1985, quoted in Pennycook, 1994: 124). Thus discourses, through the relationships that are established both within and beyond the discourse, can be seen to reflect different social realities and consequently differing power relations (Castleton, 1997:93).

Discourses of literacy at work as skill

While the work of Darrah (1992, 1997) and others is concerned with casting doubt over the validity of discourses on work that define the enterprise solely in terms of the skills required to perform it, the same sorts of issues could be taken up with proponents of the functional literacy discourse that predominates in contemporary understandings of the relationship between literacy and work. Advocates of this view argue that it is possible to define literacy at work purely as the individual skills necessary to complete particular tasks. These widespread popular conceptions of literacy and its relationships to work have become the 'popular discourse' that "reflect[s] dominant ways of thinking, talking and writing about the issue" (Hull, 1993:22). Within this discourse, responsibility for poor performance, and for the inability of individual enterprises, industries and nations to take up the challenges of new work orders in international marketplaces, is placed with workers. It is the skills of workers that are found wanting in these discourses, with other workplace participants, namely managers and employers credited with the necessary attributes to meet and surmount the challenges.

Most pervasive among the commonly held beliefs on literacy and work, as frequently presented in the popular media, is the straight-forward representation of workers as possessing inadequate literacy skills for current and future jobs (Gowen 1992, 1994; Luke, 1992; Freebody and Welch, 1993; Hull, 1993, 1997; Castleton, 1997, 1998; Green, Hodgens,and Luke, 1997). These depictions draw very particularly on a deficit representation that assumes a causal relationship between such deficiencies and people's ability to perform at work. In addition, these accounts have taken on an undisputed, official status, being presented in government funded reports such as *Workplace basics: The skills employers want* (Carnevale, Gainer & Meltzer, 1988) in the United States and *Words at Work: Literacy Needs in the Workplace* (1991) in Australia. In the Australian report, for example, the claim is made that:

> There is now general agreement that Australia needs a more flexible and highly skilled workforce capable of maximising

> its productivity, producing quality goods and innovatively exploiting both new technologies and market opportunities. In the drive to achieve these results it has become apparent that poor literacy, numeracy and English language skills of a significant number of adults and youth is an impediment to this occurring.
>
> (*Words at Work*, 1991:5)

This report goes on further to situate many of this 'significant number' in workplaces, stating that:

> Workers with inadequate literacy, numeracy and language skills have been identified in a wide cross section of industries and workplaces. While the full extent of the problem is not known the available evidence demonstrates that it is an issue of serious concern.
>
> (*Words at Work*, 1991:9).

Within this 'official' document, and in other similar texts, treatment of workers' skills relies heavily on the functional literacy discourse to describe the required levels of literacy competence for contemporary workplaces. By focusing on skill or competence as an individual possession or attribute, these discourses allow workers who do not possess the prescribed levels of skill to be constructed as inadequate for the task. From this position workers with poor literacy skills are then held accountable for poor economic performance at an industry and national level (Castleton, 1997:82).

New ways of work and new worker identities

Workers designated with low levels of literacy or literacy skill, therefore, do not fare well within discourses that convey the new work order. Typically found in what Gee, Hull and Lankshear (1996) have described as 'fast capitalist' texts, these discourses privilege certain kinds of workers over others. The literature on the new work order, and on the relationship between work and literacy, relies heavily on our culturally shared understandings and acceptance of the accounts offered of how work is done. Along with these understandings come the ensuing norms, rights, capabilities, social and moral responsibilities attributed to people defined as fitting the category of 'worker' (Castleton, 1997:174). These institutional texts make a strong case for workers to be innovative, flexible and highly skilled (Lepani & Williams, 1991; Boyett & Conn, 1992; Hammer & Champy, 1993;). Workers must be able to participate in different work practices involving not only technical and interpersonal skills, but also intellectual skills that give their companies the 'critical edge' over their local and international competitors. Underpinning the new work order is a particular conception of the 'human capital' model that depends on "mobilizing the powers of intellectual labour as a vehicle for further accumulation" (Harvey, 1989:186). Within this conceptualization, the human aspects of work dominate over more traditional technical and mechanical features. According to Hammer and Champy (1993:66), there are rewards for workers for the increased efforts they are expected to put into their work, as "[a]fter reengineering work becomes more satisfying, since people's jobs have a greater component of growth and learning". The new work culture is credited with providing "membership, purposefulness, belonging, and meaning" that, according to Boyett and Conn (1991:3-4), had been missing from workers' lives managed by Fordist or Taylorist styles of work arrangements.

The essential purpose of the 'fast capitalist' texts and the discourses framed by them is the material and conceptual re-design of the social relations of the workplace, creating not only a new workplace culture, but new identities for its participants. The commonsense and

unquestioned logic of this rhetoric frequently serves to mask the demise of many workers who may not have the level of skill required to participate in the new workplaces, or more insidiously, the reality of fewer jobs to go around, particularly for those deemed to be least skilled. Smith (1987, 1990) has determined that, within such institutional texts, particular 'relations of ruling' are established thereby creating a 'virtual reality' (Smith, 1990:62) for and about those who are constituted and positioned within the discourses presented. Discourses within the predominant texts on literacy at work establish a particular version of knowledge about the place of literacy in the workplace, that sees workers, in very particular ways, contributing to the nation's inability to compete effectively in the international marketplace. What is assembled through these discourses is a picture of 'workers' who are clearly operating outside the parameters of what is means to be 'good workers', including possessing adequate levels of functional literacy skills (Castleton, 1997:181).

The dominant discourse on workplace literacy contains significant omissions and silences, so that contemporary understandings do not allow for a proper account of workers, for how 'literacy is made' at work, and for its place in the everyday lives of all people. Grounded as it is in other discourses of literacy and work that are themselves incomplete and flawed, not only does the prevalent workplace literacy discourse offer limited understandings of the inter-relationships existing between literacy and work, but also works to constitute and strengthen particular power relations within work settings and beyond.

Effects of new discourses of (and at) work

This reality reinforces Foucault's (1980) contention that power and knowledge are interrelated and inseparable, so that any field of knowledge constitutes at the same time certain power relations. Within the increasingly segregated workforce found in today's workplace such formulations define some as winners and others as losers. Contemporary discourses of work privilege a particular account of work that creates new social realities and identities in workplaces. The power structures constituted within these discourses become apparent, however, when it is realised that assuming these new identities exposes certain contradictory practices that, while seemingly serving all workers, may actually privilege a few at the expense of the many.

The new discourses on work name those experiences considered to be important to contemporary society, establishing differentially valued discursive practices as they are displayed by some, thereby denying credibility and validity to the experiences of others, bearing out Boyett and Conn's (1992:277) comment that "the world itself is changing in respect to how and what type of human effort is valued". Castleton's (1997) study of workplace literacy in the Australian context found that people representing industry frequently talked of how workers' skill levels "used to be okay", but now, under new working arrangements, these same workers' skills were framed as "not okay". The very skills that enabled them to be described as the "good workers" in traditional ways of doing work, including the particular ways in which they communicated with one another in individual work contexts, now were used to separate them out as the "poor" workers, that is those with limited literacy skills. The strong emphasis given to workers' skills within these discourses displays not only their heavy reliance on the functional literacy discourse in their descriptions of workers' literacy competence, but also their predilection to use binary oppositional structures to do their work. Within new discourses, workers are typically categorised as 'skilled' or 'unskilled', with all the rewards on offer in the "enchanted workplace" (Gee, 1994; Gee, Hull & Lankshear, 1996) available to the skilled, and a bleak future for the 'other', the unskilled.

The common practice of relying on the functional discourse to explain literacy at work also "disguises and effectively naturalizes the ideological role of literacy in contemporary society" (Street, 1995:125), and allows for certain conceptualizations of worker identity that carry with them particular moral implications. Literacy from this mechanistic and technicist sense becomes a representation of many of contemporary society's most serious problems: workers with limited literacy skills can be held responsible for poor economic performance at an enterprise, industry and national level. From this situated perspective, blame is located in individuals and explanations are framed in terms of ethnicity, disposition and socio-economic circumstance, not in institutional justifications of fiscal difficulties, organisational mis-management or market declines. These predominant explanations of the relationship between literacy and work succeed in masking the complexities involved in understanding contemporary economic and political life. Within this framework literacy takes on a signification that far outweighs what features of social life can adequately and appropriately be explained in terms of its actual role in people's lives.

Current understandings of workplace literacy training

The field of workplace literacy training, within Australia and other western nations, has generally emerged out of the coupling of new discourses about work and workers' skills with the functional literacy discourse (Gowen, 1992, 1994; Hull, 1993, 1997; Castleton, 1997). Within the United States, a functional-context approach, premised on the functional literacy discourse, in which what constitutes literacy skill is able to be identified, measured and related to specific job tasks, has emerged as the most popular form of workplace literacy provision (Hollenbeck, 1993; Hull, 1993, 1997). Recent research conducted within Australia into the effectiveness of workplace literacy training (Pearson, Bean, Duffy, Manidis, Walkenberg and Wyse, 1996), also demonstrates the extent to which this endeavour is driven by the functional literacy discourse as well as by formulations of work that emphasise the independent skills of individual workers.

This trend is worrying when considered alongside the realization that the pedagogy of workplace literacy teaching has, to date, largely gone unchallenged. Research conducted in the United States and supported by studies in Australia (e.g. Cumming, Falk and Freebody, 1994), has found that adult literacy programs, including those offered in workplaces, as a rule "fall back on traditional ways of teaching, ones that replicate the ways children are taught in school" (Schultz, 1997:62). These findings affirm Falk and Duggan's (in Falk, 1995:180) assertions that the adult literacy field in Australia, from which workplace literacy developed, originates from a school-based ideology. In his discussion of the teaching of literacy to adults within a vocational education context, Falk (1994:231) found that "the discipline, content and social relations of schooling are seen to be reproduced through the jointly constructed meanings made". Many such programs involving adult students often work to sustain inappropriate roles and relationships for teachers and participants (students), based as they are on school-based discourses that work to maintain existing power structures in society. They can therefore simply reinforce negative school-based notions of teaching and learning for the participants so that they remain passive recipients of the

knowledge determined and passed onto them by the workplace teachers. The pervasive influence of the functional literacy discourse evidenced in discourses of work, of literacy at work and also within what Street (1995:125) has called the 'pedagogization' of literacy in schools means that workers may be being held back by out-dated and inappropriate approaches to teaching and learning that reinforce autonomous views of literacy and particular social identities, values and beliefs. As Schultz (1997:67) found in her critique of workplace education programs funded by the U.S. Department of Education through the National Workplace Literacy Program, many US companies are "establishing workplace education programs [that] are using the classrooms of yesterday to teach for the workplaces of tomorrow".

This situation becomes disturbing in an environment where school literacy pedagogy has itself been critiqued and challenged (Street, 1995; Freebody, Ludwig and Gunn, 1996; Prinsloo & Breier, 1996; Green, Hodgens and Luke, 1997). There can be no doubt that workplace literacy practices that model themselves on existing models of school literacy will not fully prepare workers for newly organised workplaces. While the value and importance of including reading materials and writing exercises drawn from actual occupational settings cannot be undermined, there is cause for concern about programs that "do not consciously change the other assumptions underlying its teaching methods" (Grubb, 1997:172). Though applauding the use of 'authentic' workplace texts in workplace literacy programs, O'Connor (1994:279) has noted that in such contexts "we seldom take the time to learn about the layers of authenticity or meaning that may reside in these texts and their uses". As Jolliffe (1997:340) has written, workplace texts are "instantiations of discourse" that set about establishing and maintaining certain categories of people, with specific attributions, as well as particular systems of knowledge and beliefs, therefore any efforts to assist workers in accessing workplace texts must view them "as discourse and speculate about the ways writers and readers both construct meaning and are constructed as meaningful by the operation of discourse" (Jolliffe, 1997:340). This point can be clearly demonstrated in the analysis of texts such as the "Vision/Mission Statement" and "Core Values" that typically grace the walls of company offices and staff canteens. From this standpoint the reading and writing of texts can be viewed as discursive practice, rather than as a set of skills to be taught

by 'us' and learned by 'them' (Brodkey, 1992:294). Brodkey (1992:301) has argued further that "it is the discourses (or worldviews or ideologies) rather than the languages we learn that teach us how to read and write the world as well as words". Within the Australian context, the "reading" of authentic texts in workplace literacy learning environments might focus around the very enterprise bargaining argreements that define specific worker identities and how work is to be done in particular workplace settings.

Considering the ways in which the new discourse on workplace literacy may be engaged in the task of creating new worker identities, it is also worth acknowledging the findings of Schultz (1997:65) that "[p]rograms which label learners as 'workers' often seek to emphasize the social, historical and political relationships in the workplace as integral to the curriculum". In addition, Hull reported of her studies of workplace training in the United States instances where the values and beliefs presented to workers were overtly tied to the interests of the company (Gee, Hull and Lankshear, 1996:102). An outcome of such practices in the lives of many people may be that instead of, or in addition to, the schooling system determining if they can be characterised as 'literate' or 'illiterate', employers and others working on their behalf are now setting the standards by which some people are pronounced 'illiterate', as well as determining the content and skills that determine what it means to 'become literate' (Schultz, 1997:51). The work of Hart-Landberg and Reder (1993:32) has also highlighted the extent to which companies that implement particular educational programs can shape the concept of literacy conveyed to employees through the curriculum that is presented, as well as by the teaching and learning methods employed.

Such findings reinforce Limage's (1993:25) assertion that "workplace literacy programs ... tend to respond to agendas other than those that reflect a learner's aspirations or reality", and urge us to reflect on where and how workers' existing literate behaviours are considered in workplace literacy training. This point also raises important issues about how the effectiveness of workplace literacy programs is determined. The useful study conducted by Pearson and colleagues within the Australian context has argued a strong case for demonstrated "significant gains in productivity, efficiency and economic competitiveness linked directly to workplace English language, literacy

and numeracy inclusive training" (Pearson, Bean, Duffy, Manidis, Walkenberg and Wyse, 1996:3). However, the authors have acknowledged difficulty in acquiring quantitative proof of the success of workplace literacy training and note that "[t]he time-consuming aspect of such measurement appears to be based on the well-founded assumption that it is a very difficult thing to do" (Pearson, Bean, Duffy, Manidis, Walkenberg and Wyse, 1996:39). They observe that

> [a]part from the logistics of the exercise, the impact in the workplace of any sort of training was seen in general to be too intertwined with a constellation of other workplace variables for it to be considered practicable. In other words, the 'impact of training' variable could not reliably be measured in isolation from the influences of others.
>
> *(Pearson, Bean, Duffy, Manidis, Walkenberg and Wyse, 1996:39).*

It is notable, though, that while the "the constellation of other workplace variables" made it difficult to quantitatively determine the effects of workplace literacy training, it did not appear to offer any barrier to this project identifying a succinct list of isolated, neutral literacy skills, or to regarding workplace documents in a "value-empty, ideologically neutral fashion" (Jolliffe, 1997:340). In discussing the impact of workplace literacy programs in over a thousand small and medium-sized firms in the state of Michigan, Hollenbeck (1993) also acknowledged difficulty in determining economic returns from investments in workplace literacy programs. His research lead him to conclude that it is difficult in the first instance to reach agreement on what the outcomes should be, and then to find consensus on effective means of measurement. Profit levels, the primary concern of employers, are dependent on too many variables, both internal and external to a company, to be used as a performance indicator. Furthermore, Hollenbeck's (1993:64) contention that attempts to evaluate workplace literacy programs characteristically focusing on upgrading individual workers' skill levels meet the "problem of trying to disentangle an individual's contribution to productivity or quality when in fact output is often a joint product of many workers plus capital equipment", reinforce the importance of recognising work as social activity. The research of Pearson and colleagues (1996) into the impact of workplace literacy training in the

Australian context, however, appears to have met this complication without being able to give due account of its composition. A further concern emerging out of research conducted to date in Australia in this area is the lack of focus on workplace literacy pedagogy so that teaching and learning practices that may be inappropriate to workplace contexts, remain unchallenged. This important work must be undertaken so that the field is able to argue and justify its significant and rightful role in workplace education specifically and adult education generally.

Potential futures for workplace literacy training

Far richer, more meaningful formulations of literacy than those offered in the functional literacy discourse need to be applied to the context of work to fully appreciate the role literacy plays both for workers and for work, and to develop a distinctive workplace literacy pedagogy. Such models do exist as the writings of researchers like Gowen (1992, 1994), Hull (1993, 1997) and Prinsloo and Breier (1996) show, though the numbers of these studies remain small and the take-up of their findings largely unknown to date. Recent studies reported by Hull and others (see Hull, 1997) demonstrate the rich interplay of communicative practices that do exist in workplaces, though they are not often given the legitimacy they deserve.

Castleton's (1997) study of workplace literacy policy and practice in Australia reported evidence of workers typically relying on other workmates, particularly in those tasks that involve some form of literacy, as they go about their jobs. This process is a fundamental part of social life both within and beyond workplaces that, rather than be ignored, must be accommodated in our understandings of literacy and of work. There are examples in the literature of networks operating in workplaces that give a far more accurate representation of how work is actually achieved through the sharing of knowledge and skills rather than by individual performance (Gowen, 1992, 1994; Hull, 1993, 1997; Darrah, 1992, 1997); Castleton & Wyatt-Smith, 1995). While traditional accounts of literacy at work build on the 'literacy as skill' metaphor and its underpinning notions of 'deficit', these accounts allow for more positive metaphors to come into play that can capture more effectively the collective nature of work, as well as account for how people may move in and out of particular roles as work is accomplished.

Workplaces as 'communities of practice'

Understandings of workplaces as 'communities of practice' would assist in removing the present concern for the individual skill level of workers that is currently reflected in much of the research, grounded in the functional literacy discourse that highlights workers as being 'deficient'. While there is some evidence that such deficit approaches may result in improved performance in the short term (Pearson, Bean, Duffy, Manidis, Walkenberg and Wyse, 1996), Gowen (1994:134) has warned, however, that they do little to help organisations "restructure themselves into more humane and democratic workplaces". In addition, the results of research conducted in countries such as the United States (reported in Hull, 1997), Australia (Castleton, 1997) and South Africa (Prinsloo & Breier, 1996) may cast some doubt over the long-term benefits of such programs that do not recognise the diversity and complexity of workplaces and of the individuals and groups that inhabit them. A socio-cultural approach to literacy and to new-capitalist business would argue that learning for performance requires the acquisition of tacit knowledge through immersion in communities of practice (Gee, Hull and Lankshear, 1996:158). However, Gee and colleagues further maintain that there is a need to "go beyond simple immersion to gain the ability both to reflect on one's tacit knowledge and to critique the communities within which one has achieved it" (Gee, Hull and Lankshear, 1996:158). The approach advocated by Gee and colleagues may be likened to Wolfensberger's (1992:32) conception of social role valorization, described as "the enablement, establishment, enhancement, maintenance and/or defense of valued social roles for people - particularly for those at value risk - by using, as much as possible, culturally valued means". This perspective signifies how workplace literacy training could focus on identifying and recognising the hidden culture of the workplace, including the workers' own texts and the textual and contextual cues they employ in getting the work done. This focus on valorization comes from the wider agenda of the role of social role valorization in human services, and may usefully involve practitioners in debates currently being pursued around the impact of

legitimately valorizing workers' texts and practices for the purposes of valuing their culture. The 'pay off' for industry from this approach to workplace literacy training in particular can be quality work, performed by committed workers, that results in the 'value added' product required in today's marketplace.

Pedagogy and curriculum for workplace literacy training must be developed that focuses less on what we all have been socialised to think of in terms of traditional education, and more on articulating the value of literacy in the lives of the workers to whom it is addressed (Collins, Balmuth and Jean, 1989). A workplace literacy pedagogy needs to emerge that not only allows for and sustains, but also valorizes, the voices and experiences of workers as they interrogate workplace texts, social relations and practices to determine where and how they can, in Giroux's (1988:65) terms "locate themselves in their own histories and in doing so make themselves present as actors". Such an approach would extend the catchcry of 'fast capitalist' texts of worker emancipation to give workers an authentic and authoritative say in their own destinies. Rather than working to establish the cultural conformity implicit in new discourses of work, workplace literacy programs need to attend more closely to the benefits of 'productive diversity' that "focuses on the dynamic relationship of differences in the establishment of common ground" (Cope & Kalantzis, 1997:16).

All those involved in the field are therefore urged to inspect their own roles in this process. Just as workplace literacy programs can help workers move from a state of 'naive' to 'critical' consciousness (Freire, 1972), so too can those working in workplace literacy examine their own roles from a critical perspective to avoid becoming unwittingly implicated in educational projects perhaps not of their choosing (Lankshear, 1994:107). Some of the earlier philosophical concerns that arose from adult literacy practitioners about their changing roles in unstable working environments influenced by the economic rationalist discourses of government and business agendas must remain uppermost as the future of workplace literacy is determined. This work may require what Luke (1995) has described as "getting our hands dirty", an act not uncommon for workplace literacy practitioners, at both a literal and metaphoric level.

Workplace literacy 'work' must fulfil real purposes for all stakeholders, providing for all "the means of grasping the social relations organizing the worlds of their experience" (Smith, 1987:153). In the terms discussed by Gee, Hull and Lankshear (1996:166), in their critique of the new work order, learning and education "become always and everywhere about being in, about comparing and contrasting, reflecting on and critiquing, *Discourses* - about the kinds of people we are, are becoming, and want to be". If this does not become the case, then workplace literacy runs the risk of being, in Foucault's (1980) terms, a disciplinary discourse that sets out to legitimate and sustain certain forms of power/knowledge.

Opportunities for authentic workplace literacy provision

Consistent with the issues raised in this paper, it is imperative that workplace literacy trainers and coordinators fully understand the contexts in which they are now working. This requires a knowledge and understanding of the existing legislation, at both federal and state levels, that operates to provide opportunities for promoting and valuing workplace literacy training. The legislation works to argue for, and recognise, the value of effective worker participation within industry. It provides a broad text from which liberal humanist values can be implemented in workplaces through conduits such as workplace literacy training. This work also requires recognising how, in Luke's (1995) terms, the competency movement can be seen as a "double edged process". While it may be argued that this movement has the potential (realised in many contexts) to become a narrow, technical way of rationalising work and work-related educational outcomes, it also can be used as a way of framing curriculum that seriously addresses the literacy needs of adults including workers. It was this kind of thinking that informed the National Framework of Adult English Language, Literacy and Numeracy Competence (1994) that has, in turn, been taken up in all curricula development in this area in Australia in recent years. Current curriculum documents therefore have the potential to be 'customised' to meet the individual and collective learning needs of workers in various kinds of worksites throughout the country.

From a worker perspective, the 'text' of most importance is the content and context of the existing agreement, certified if it is a unionised site or perhaps individual, or another form of registered agreement, operating in their worksite, that make legal the conditions and wages of the workers. The legislation therefore can serve as the platform from which workplace literacy programs can be developed that apply the notion of valorization of workers' particular skills in unpacking and examining existing workplace practices, encouraging better informed, collaborative, and more positive approaches that lead to improved conditions and outcomes for all stakeholders.

Mechanisms to access workplaces to promote literacy

At a federal, and in this instance, Queensland level, the following legislation can assist in the practical marketing often necessary to gain access to worksites: the Workplace Relations Act (federal), the anti-Discrimination Act (Queensland), the Workplace Health and Safety Act (Queensland), the Environment Protection Act (Queensland) and the Workcover Act (Queensland). Similar pieces of legislation exist in other states and territories. No one piece of legislation predominates in regard to gaining such access. Rather, consideration of individual circumstances, particularly the type of workplace in which access is being sought, needs to occur. The application of the relevant piece or pieces of legislation can then create the entree to any particular site. A technical appreciation of each of the pieces of legislation may assist in determining which is more appropriate to the circumstances.

The Workplace Relations Act (Federal) provides at Sections 170LJ, 170LK and 170LR that an employer must take reasonable steps to ensure that before a certified agreement (between an employer and union, or employer and employee/s) is approved that the terms of the agreement are explained to all persons (s.170LJ(3), s.170LK(7), 170LR(2)). A certified agreement is an adjunctive document to either an award or employment contract, which serves to amend the terms of the award or contract. Such an agreement, as the name suggests, is **agreed** to between the employer and union, or employer and employee/s, rather than being imposed. Workplace literacy programs can serve to lessen the potential gaps in power relations between various parties as these various agreements are formed and formalised.

For example, Section 170LT provides that the explanation of the terms of the agreements set out above must have taken place in ways that were appropriate having regard to the person's particular circumstances and needs. An example of such a case, as referenced within the legislation, would be where the persons included *'persons from a non-English speaking background'*. This recognises that workers whose first language is not English may suffer disadvantage if the terms of such an

agreement are not explained in a manner suitable (for example in their preferred language) to them. The extension of this exemplar would be for workers whose capacity to comprehend a written agreement may be diminished by their literacy levels.

Two of the other pieces of legislation identified above, are interrelated to the requirements of the Workplace Relations Act (Federal) through the operation of Section 170LZ. This provision outlines that a certified agreement that deals with the following matters operates subject to the provisions of state legislation that deal with those same matters: occupational health and safety and workers' compensation (s.170LZ(2)). There is an important interplay between the federal legislation and those two pieces of state legislation that require closer attention at an industry and enterprise level.

The Workplace Health and Safety Act (Queensland) provides at Section 6 that the Act applies to everyone who may affect the health and safety of others because of workplaces, workplace activities, and everyone whose health and safety may be affected by workplaces and workplace activities. Section 7 sets out the objective of the Act as to prevent a person's death. injury or illness being caused by workplace activities. The objective is achieved by providing within the legislation an onus on the prevention or minimisation of a person's exposure to the risk of death, injury or illness caused by workplace activities. The Act then imposes workplace health and safety obligations on certain persons who may affect the health and safety of others by their acts or omissions.

Section 28 provides that an employer has an obligation to ensure the workplace health and safety of each of the employer's workers at work. This includes (refer Section 36) that a worker has the following obligations at a workplace - to comply with the instructions given for workplace health and safety at the workplace by the employer at the workplace.

The interplay between this legislation, and the practical marketing of workplace literacy, is clear. If the onus is on the employer providing a healthy and safe work environment, and such onus extends to ensuring that workers are able to comply with instructions on such health and safety, then the employer has an obligation to ensure that such workers

have the capacity to comprehend safety signage, written instructions etc.

Similarly the Workcover Act (Queensland) provides at Section 50 that an employer is legally liable for compensation for injury sustained by a worker employed by the employer. If such injury was sustained as a result of an incapacity for a worker to understand health and safety issues, then the liability for any accident falls on the employer. As employers are directly benefited, through premium levels, and reward payments, by minimising the level of accident and workcover claims within their workplace, then there is a financial imperative associated with the provision of adequate and effective workplace literacy training.

As referenced earlier, the other pieces of legislation that may assist in establishing the practical marketing of workplace literacy include the anti-Discrimination Act (Queensland) and the Environment Protection Act (Queensland). The former piece of legislation provides at Section 7 that discrimination is prohibited on the basis of a range of attributes, including race. Discrimination on the basis of an attribute includes direct and indirect discrimination on the basis of a characteristic that a person with any of the attributes generally has (see Section 8).

Section 15 provides that a person must not discriminate in denying or limiting opportunities for promotion, transfer, training or other benefit to a worker. Direct discrimination on the basis of an attribute happens if a person treats, or proposes to treat a person with an attribute less favourably than another person without the attribute is or would be treated in circumstances that are the same or not materially different (Section 10). Indirect discrimination on the basis of an attribute exists if a person imposes, or proposes to impose, a term with which a person with an attribute does not or is not able to comply, and with which a higher proportion of people without the attribute comply or are able to comply and that is not reasonable (Section 11).

The latter Act - Environment Protection Act (Queensland) - provides at Section 36, that a person must not carry out any activity that causes or is likely to cause environmental harm unless the person takes all reasonable and practicable measure to prevent or minimise the harm. Section 37 provides that a person has a duty to notify or environmental harm if that person becomes aware that serious or material

environmental harm is caused or threatened by the person's or someone else's act or omission in carrying out the primary activity or another activity being carried out in association with the primary activity. This legislation has some interaction with both the Workplace Health and Safety Act and the Workcover Act in regard to ensuring that workers are able to comprehend written instructions or directions, if the failure to do so may result in a breach of the environment Protection Act, or alternatively the breaching of the requirement to notify of environmental harm.

Conclusion

In addition to recognising the opportunities existing legislation provides for the marketing and development of appropriate workplace literacy training, all those involved in the field must acknowledge the shelf life of legislation, and the need to actively promote continuing legislation that works for the benefit of all workplace participants. Further acknowledgment must also be given to the fluid political situation within which workplace literacy training takes place, and its contingency on factors that extend beyond traditional and emerging educational contexts and concerns.

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The authors of the booklets, who are recognised experts in their field, were invited to write for an audience of literacy practitioners in the community, TAFE, university, ACTU, industry and private providers. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the views of Language Australia.

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